

PRESS RELEASE

"Long March Project: Why Go To Tibet"

Qiu Zhijie, Total Art Studio of China Academy of Fine Art

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Long March Space, Beijing

In 2002, when "Long March—A Walking Visual Display" was on the path of the historical Long March, the curators conceived an idea to conduct an investigation of the Tibetan peoples and their views of Tibetan subject matter in paintings.

On April 5, 2006, "Subverting Shangri-la --- Survey of Tibetan Subject Matter in Painting" was launched by the Comprehensive Art Department of the Chinese Academy Art (Hangzhou). This complex social engagement with the concept of Tibet as a Shangri-la - a fictional place of earthly harmony was conducted over a month and a half period, this survey and investigation was designed and directed by artist and Professor Qiu Zhijie, with participants comprised of 2nd and 3rd year studio art majors. An additional 2 alumni and 1 international student also took part out of their own interest.

The investigation was conducted in three phases. The first phase was archival research, using library books as the main reference, students gathered and researched artworks from the past thirty years that manifested some aspect of Tibet, from Tibetan life, to Tibetan landscape and culture. The main media involved were oil and ink paintings, prints, sculpture and murals. Numerous works by the key representatives of every period in modern Chinese art history were revisited, starting from the early period with Zhang Daqian, Zhong Xiwen, to Ye Qianyu in the 1950s, Pan Shixun, A Ge, and Niu Wen in the 60s, Chen Danqing, Ai Xuan, Shi Guoliang, Chao Shuli, and so on in the 70s and 80s, to the romanticized paintings after the 90s. Also taken into consideration were the works of Tibetan painters Amdo Jampas and Nima Zeren, and even current mass-produced, tourist commodities This research investigation reorganized

Address: 798 Art District, 4 Jiuxianqiao Rd, Chaoyang District, Beijing

Mailing: Long March Space. Mailbox 8530, Beijing. P.R. China 100015

地址：北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号798艺术区 | 邮址：北京市8503信箱长征空间 邮编 100015

the different artistic origins, developments, styles and forms of Tibetan subject matter in painting. Four hundred documented works were subsequently selected and digitally reprinted as photographs in order to be taken on the road for on-site investigations.

Classroom lectures and online research was also concurrently conducted on such topics as: introduction to Tibetan history and culture; development of the Tibetan painting genre and its linkages with China's ideological mainstream during their respective periods; the concepts and history of the development of naturalism, realism, and critical-realism; and Tibetan artistic subject matter versus the system of artistic display surrounding the China National Art Exhibition, etc.

Over the years, Tibetan subject matter in painting has been nominally carried under the banner of realism, but in fact, the works consistently reflect ideological influences of the period. Tibetan subject matter is consistently appropriated to achieve different ideological purposes, including: contrasting the old and new generations; the construction of an ethnically diverse China, rejecting the culture of primitive life and superstition; and rejecting modernity and returning to Shangri-la. It is permeated by revolutionary, ethnic and national culture, and today's increasing tourist environment. Indeed, it is distinctly separated from the realities of the local people, produced to fit into a particular agenda.

The second stage of the survey primarily consisted of the forty students and teachers conducting on-site surveys in Luhuo County, Dege County, Shiqu County in Ganzizhou, Sichuan Province; Yushu, Qinghai, and Xining; as well as Lhasa, Shigatse, and Nyalam County in Tibet. The four hundred re-printed works were set up as open-air galleries in lhama temples, high schools, markets and soccer fields. A field investigation method was adopted with surveying primarily being based on observations and interviews. These experiences were later used to build a survey questionnaire, designed to understand and collect the local people's view on these works of Tibetan subject matter. At the last showing, the artworks were given to the local people as a way to gauge their aesthetic tastes and standards – some works were taken immediately,

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others were refused. A portion of the students also used the methodology of survey and investigation to engage in direct interaction with the locals, creating additional visual materials. Moreover, the students and teachers engaged in a wide range of contact and communication with the local Living Buddha, monasteries, and government officials. The survey demanded that participants compose a summary of their interrelated experiences, emphasizing the transformations of each individual's self-understanding of their involvement in the project. Each participant was requested to choose a keyword, and use the structure "Originally, I thought... now I have discovered ..." to create three sentences in this way, enabling them to relate the changes in the condition of their self-understanding.

The last phase was conducted in Hangzhou and involved the analysis of the materials gathered from the questionnaires and visit. Based upon this research, students were asked to compile a report with a logical discourse based on each respective personal question. These materials form an archive for display. At the same time, different artwork proposals created after the journey have been continually under development and are in various stages of execution. Some of the students have since returned to Tibet to take part in the realization of these projects. The exhibition on display at the Long March Space is both archival documentation as well as new works related to this experience.

Utilizing the methodology of sociological and anthropological research, this comprehensive investigation surveying the realities of Tibetan life and cultural resources, can be used as an opportunity to overturn mainstream cultural perceptions of Tibet. At the same time, the project strives to critically interpret and make use of the resources of Tibet, break down preconceived notions of Tibetan culture, and stimulate a healthy dialogue between two differing systems of thought. One can perhaps say that "interaction" has replaced "representation" as the new keyword. Changing the perception and self-recognition of the user of cultural resource is one of the key tasks of this new method of artistic creation. Through transcending the narrow field of vision of the individual and confronting the false novelty intertwined with the image of Shangri-la, the project strives to establish and seek out a foundation

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for recollection. It is using every effort to affect actual systems of thought. This project is a social investigation of a creative process, and so becomes a new interpretation of the spirit of realism.

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